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SUBJECT: LIBERALS CHART RENEWAL IN 2010

REF: OTTAWA 0001; 09 OTTAWA 909; 09 OTTAWA 954; 09 OTTAWA 341

11. (SBU) Summary: The Liberal Party of Canada plans an eighteen month program of policy renewal, rebuilding, and member engagement to "inspire, engage, activate" the party faithful between now and its next biennial convention in June 2011. It will also organize a long-delayed "thinkers' conference" in Montreal in March to cast around for new campaign themes and policy ideas, apparently conceding that a 2010 election may not be in the cards. The Liberals' muted response to PM Harper's late December prorogation of Parliament (ref b) suggests a lack of energy and hands-on leadership (Michael Ignatieff reportedly remains on vacation in France), however. The party's "transformational" process sets high goals, but a similar 2006 renewal exercise did not meet expectations. The Liberals face a tough road ahead if they hope to beat the Conservatives in the next federal election - whether in 2010 or 2011. End summary.

2009 "A TOUGH YEAR"

12. (SBU) Despite the new leadership of Michael Ignatieff, a reported tripling of membership, a 50% increase in fundraising (almost all of which the Liberals collected in the first half of 2009, however), and a five-fold rise in the donor base over 2008, Liberal Party National President Alfred Apps conceded to party members in an end-of-year message that 2009 had been a "tough year." From the high of the April-May convention in Vancouver (ref.d), the party misread public aversion for another election and slumped in the polls in August after Ignatieff started publicly to vow to bring down the government of Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper in the fall. By mid-December, the Liberals were ten points behind the Conservatives, and Ignatieff personally trailed PM Harper on indices of trust, competence, vision and leadership, even ranking behind New Democratic Party (NDP) leader Jack Layton on overall leadership and trust. Apps' message did not refer to a possible election in 2010, instead urging members to continue to work to regain Canadians' confidence and to form a new government "whenever the next opportunity comes."

THE ROAD AHEAD

13. (SBU) Apps nonetheless expressed confidence that the party had "now turned a page." He set out a framework of continuing renewal over the next eighteen months, punctuated by a so-called non-partisan "thinkers' conference" in March in Montreal and a biennial party convention in June 2011. He called on grassroots members to consolidate gains in membership and fundraising, to reinvigorate local organization, and to help chart "a clear and positive vision" for the country's future through the policy renewal process. Apps promised that the March conference would be "the most open, transparent and inclusive debate about Canada's

future that has ever been conducted by a Canadian political party," with ideas from the conference, including party members' comments, feeding into the policy development process.

BRAINSTORMING IN SPRING

¶4. (SBU) The "thinkers' conference" - formally entitled "Canada at 150: Rising to the Challenge" -- will take place March 26 to 28 in Montreal, Quebec. In a December press release, Ignatieff had said that it would look ahead to "the Canada we can be on our country's 150th birthday" in 2017 - "and what we need to do today and tomorrow to get there." Ignatieff had initially promised the policy brainstorming exercise in 2008 as part of his first unsuccessful leadership bid, and next committed to holding one within his first 100 days of becoming leader. However, the conference has since been twice postponed, first to September 2009, then to January 2010. According to one Liberal staffer, the party is only going forward with it now "because we said we would do it." However, after the reorganization of Ignatieff's office in late October 2009, a senior Ignatieff staffer told PolMinCons that the party would push back the date to March, expand the event, and promote it as a renewal tool.

¶5. (SBU) In late December, Ignatieff also announced that he would kick off a "national conversation" with a cross-Canada tour of colleges and universities, beginning in Nova Scotia on January 11 and ending on January 18 in Ottawa, with stops in Montreal, Hamilton, Mississauga (Toronto), Winnipeg, Calgary, Vancouver, and Victoria. Ignatieff promised that all Canadians would be able to join the discussion through town hall meetings, roundtables, online, and through an official "Canada at 150" website that the party plans to launch "soon." The party has not yet released a speakers' line-up or discussion topics.

TAKING STOCK

¶6. (U) The Liberals have also set the date for its next biennial convention, from June 15 to 19, 2011 in Ottawa. The 2009 Vancouver convention (which organizers had admitted would focus primarily on administrative and organizational reform -- "plumbing and engine stuff" -- set ambitious benchmarks for fundraising, membership growth, organizational renewal, and policy participation targets to review in 2011. In January 2009, shortly after he became leader, Ignatieff had named both a renewal committee and a separate "change" commission to report on progress and policy development, building on work begun under St???phane Dion in 2008. Similarly, after the election defeat in 2006, the Liberals had appointed a renewal commission of 32 task forces headed by prominent Liberals and experts - but then effectively shelved the reports. A forward-looking "2020 conference" in 2006 chaired by former Liberal Deputy Prime Minister John Manley also produced few policy ripples. Liberal staffers privately have admitted that translating process to policy book remains a significant challenge.

¶7. (SBU) Comment: The Liberals may be starting 2010 with a roadmap, but the party's muted response to PM Harper's late December prorogation of Parliament suggests a lack of energy and hands-on leadership -- Ignatieff has reportedly not yet returned from vacation in France. The Liberals have also just lost their second national director in one year and have yet to name a replacement. National President Apps is also due to set down in March. Parliament's new return date of March 3, followed by a the introduction of the federal budget on March 4 (and ensuing confidence votes), makes the timing of the "thinkers" conference especially awkward. Moreover, the exercise is unfortunately familiar to the party faithful, and likely too heavy on process. The Liberals face a tough road ahead if they hope to beat the Conservatives in the next federal election - whether in 2010 or

